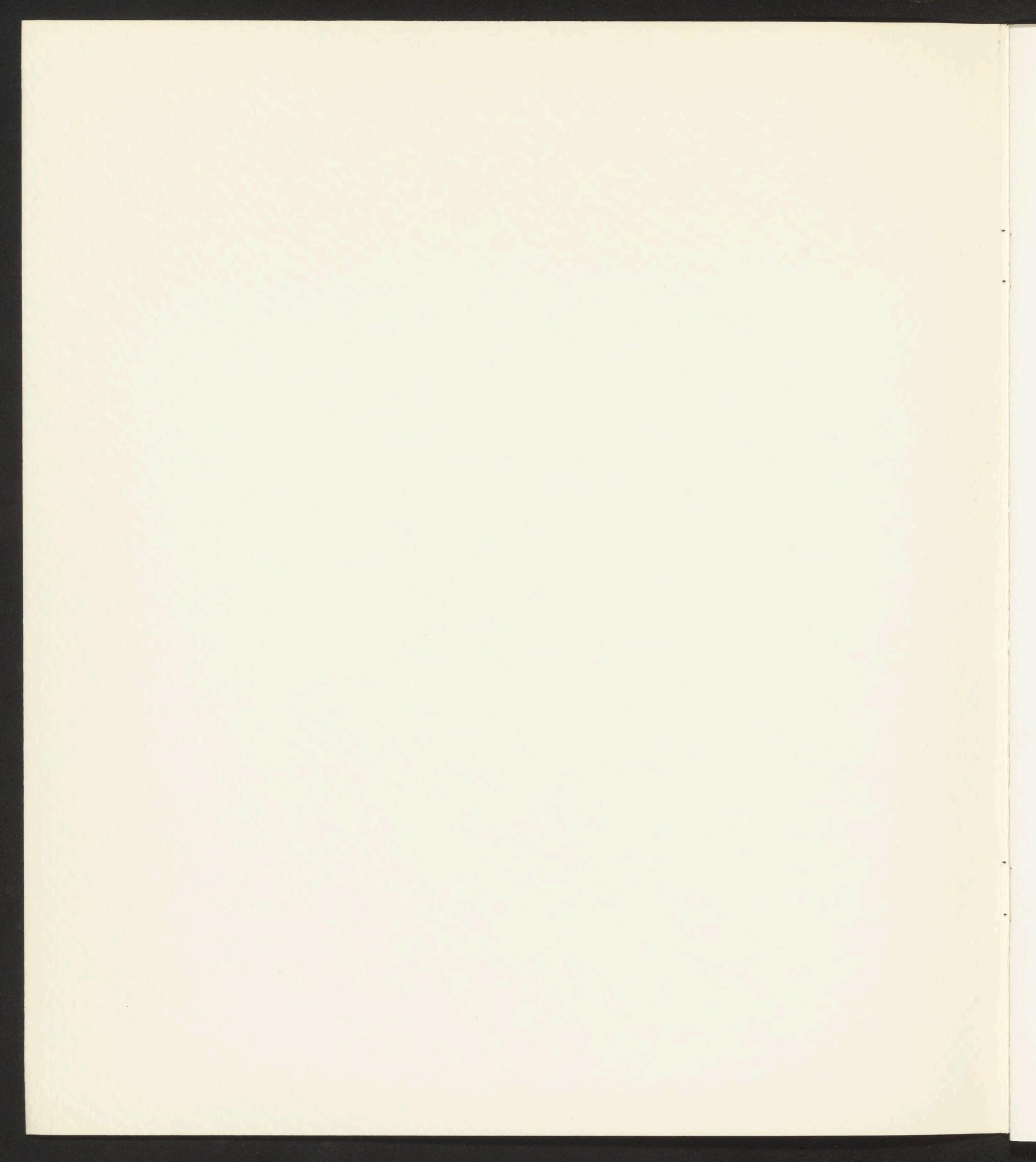


Snakes for you

John Alexander

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Modern Painters at the Corcoran

JOHN ALEXANDER

The Corcoran Gallery of Art
Washington, D.C.

March 1—May 4, 1980

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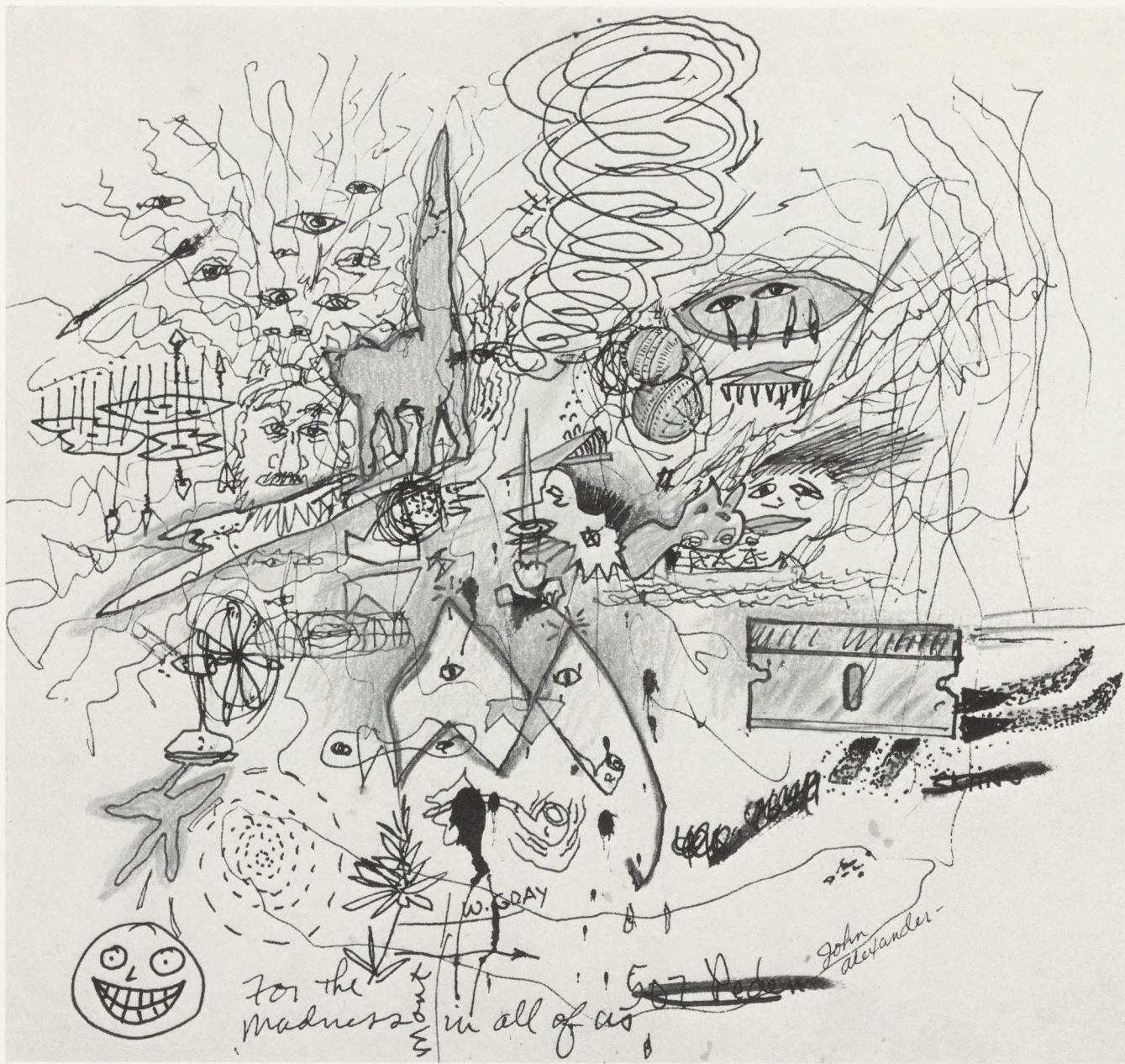
Introduction

This exhibition is one in an ongoing series of shows at the Corcoran featuring one cycle of work by one painter. The recent paintings of John Alexander shown here go a long way in themselves to justify the unusually limited scope of this project format. These fourteen canvases are audacious and painterly in the old fashioned sense. We have not seen paintings like this for a long time. But they are not simply a further step in the unfolding saga of American Expressionist styles; this work signifies some special impulse in the life of visual expression.

While in its aura of concentrated energy Alexander's new body of work creates a powerfully monolithic experience, it is also complex and lyrical, highly controlled and chromatically sophisticated. The paintings here represent an extension of the artist's earlier, more legibly ordered landscape painting — but they bring also a significant departure from his own past work and even more, from the various tendencies of recent American painting. Alexander has not, of course, entirely escaped the influence of his milieu and particularly of American painterly abstract art. However, as he himself insists, he is rejecting the position which takes *other art* as subject. Rather, he is taking on that most difficult of aesthetic tasks — the act of using authentic emotional sensation itself as the impetus for visual expression.

The following interview with John Alexander is based on conversations with me and with Donna Tennant of Houston. We want to specially thank Max Hutchinson for his cooperation in this project; and Frances Fralin, Ann Hsiao and Pamela Lawson for their assistance in the catalogue research and production.

Jane Livingston



16. *For the Madness in All of Us*, 1979, pencil, pen and ink on paper

Interview

Q: What do you see of consequence coming out of the mainstream art of the seventies?

A: I think the truth of the matter is that nothing of real consequence happened in the mainstream art of the seventies. The decade was characterized by frustration on the part of really knowledgeable people who go to galleries and museums and expect cultural stimulation. It was a decade almost totally devoid of anything stimulating. Thank God it's over.

Q: Do you honestly believe that?

A: Yes. The fact that minimal art was so important says it all. Minimal art stimulates your senses minimally, it's minimal to look at and it's minimal to think about. It ought to be left with the seventies.

Q: You obviously have a passion for gestural oil paint on canvas. Can you trace the feeling you have about painting to anything particular?

A: Have you ever seen an east Texas swamp on a foggy morning? Everything works together to give you an incredible sensation, a spiritual communication with nature. Painting is the only other thing that can give me that kind of feeling.

I actually made a decision on a particular day never to do what I call social painting, painting about what you know will sell. I walked into my former Houston gallery and saw an interior decorator with a wealthy client. They were looking at one of my paintings with wall paper samples and carpet swatches on the floor and I got a chill down my back, the kind you get from seeing someone hit by a truck. I'd put a lot into that painting they were measuring. I walked out of the gallery and asked myself what the hell I was doing. I know there is a lot of tension, anger and hostility inside of me, and I realized then that I had to find some way of putting all that into my art.

One means of getting more ambitious was to go into larger scale. I did a couple of canvases in the eight foot range as early as 1970, but all the really large ones are from the last two or three years. It takes a certain amount of courage to do a big painting. It's hard as hell to make a painting that is bigger than you are, where you have to walk ten or twelve steps to get from one end to the other. The gesture involved becomes totally different. What really got me started on the big paintings was my large drawings.

Q: As your scale increased, it seems that your brushstrokes did not get bigger in proportion.

A: I learned that from the drawings. You find a certain kind of gesture you like because it works for you. That is, you are able to express an idea with the kind of energy and feeling that you want. If I proportionally increase the size of the gesture as I increase my scale, it seems awkward.

Q: Do you think your work is fundamentally different from that of either New York or California artists?

A: I think that too many people are regionally identified. That is a major symptom of what's wrong with the art world today. In order for an artist to create something of real consequence, he has to be totally outside of all these ideas. In order to make art with real punch to it, you've got to be independent. I know that artists have always influenced each other, but the great paintings really go out on the edge. The only common denominator between me and certain West Coast artists might be that we are serious. If you look at a pure creative statement from an independent artist and think about that in comparison to the New York social art scene, the two have nothing

to do with each other. One is social and the other is spiritual. Making art is a spiritual experience and participating in a social scene is just that — a social scene.

Q: Aren't you afraid that by moving to New York you are going to be swallowed up by that enormous scene?

A: Too many artists in New York are only concerned with being artists or being in the art world. How interesting can that be? I'm much more interested in hanging out with people who get up in the morning and face the real world, who put themselves in human situations. The social art world hasn't essentially changed in a hundred years.

Q: So you think the good artist is apart from all that?

A: Good art is completely apart from all that. There is art and there is society art. Most of the art that you read about and pay big money for is simply society art. How many pathetically repetitive, boring shows do you have to see before you're tired of it? It's totally overexposed. The society that we live in has got to understand that we've got to get away from this corporate mentality. Enormous prices are paid for society art. Granted, a few of these artists were creative at some point in their lives.

Q: What about the success or failure of the institutions?

A: Museums in this country don't take nearly enough chances. Museum people need to be creative. Gallery people ought to be creative, so should writers, anybody involved in the art world. All those people should face the same problems a painter does. They should think about being innovative and going beyond what they did the day before.

Q: What do you think is the role of galleries? Can an artist make it without a gallery?

A: Of course an artist can make it without a gallery, because an artist simply makes art. Whether you're accepted within the financial structure of society — in other words, whether your work is purchased to keep you alive — has nothing to do with whether or not you make art. If you're a serious artist, you are somehow going to be involved with it all your life, with or without a gallery.

Q: To back up a little bit, what do you mean by working "on the edge?"

A: Making art that comes from your heart and inner psyche, from your emotional reaction to the world. If you deal on a surface basis all the time, you avoid the pain you need to transcend decorativeness in your painting. Dealing with your own emotions, with the paranoia, the schizophrenia, your own faults, fantasies, gets you beyond mundane decorative art. I think that by finding a way to psychologically deal with the complexity of life by using the systems I see in nature, I can approach my art at a level that transcends the oppression and psychosis of contemporary life.

Q: You said earlier that your art is frightening to you.

A: Yes, the way going to a psychiatrist is frightening to some people. But that's the whole point. Not enough people work on the edge or deal with those things. When you avoid yourself for too long, you begin to become repetitive. How can that be of interest to the artist or the public?

Q: But that is considered "development" by some people.

A: Repeating yourself?

Q: Take some artists, for example. They might be making only minor changes, but someone writing

a monograph on them would carefully show how they developed from here to here to here.

A: I wish someone would explain to me how some of these artists have developed over the past twenty years. I've actually missed the point of it all. What you see has got to be what it's about, not this constant obsession with where it came from and where it's going.

Q: Why do things like crucifixes or Ku Klux Klansmen continually show up in your work?

A: Certain images recur in my psyche, and appear as structural elements or formal images in my work. One is the triangle, another is the cross. There is an emotional energy visible in fundamentalist religious fanaticism and voodoo that is very powerful within certain groups of people. I'd like to be able to create an art that can elicit that same kind of intensity.

Q: You seem to see yourself as a kind of revolutionary figure.

A: But I'm basically a landscape painter. I feel an affinity to romantic landscape painting because I think the French romantics, for instance, use nature as a kind of political art. Few of the major figures in popular contemporary art have had the guts to be directly linked to those other painters who could be considered revolutionary, like Courbet or Manet. The "modernist" figures after Picasso are the lucky recipients of some kind of real revolution. But they usually don't have the guts to carry that to a higher level.

Q: John, it seems to me you're engaged in a constant battle to get your guts onto the canvas, and sometimes you succeed and sometimes you don't.

A: I became an expert at psychological blocking. But through a series of horrifying experiences I have broken through many barriers that limited my

abilities to honestly approach the creative part of my life. I know a lot of artists across the country and other places. I feel that a lot of them don't honestly deal with their lives on the same level they do their art. If your personal life is here and your art is there, then I feel you're lying. I do however have some sympathy with certain lying artists because I've probably lied a little in my time. Actually I've probably always been as close to the truth as I could get at any given moment in my work. But the painting that comes out of me now is coming close to something universally true, because of my own recent experiences and efforts. Frankly, Jane, we've been told extraordinary lies by almost everyone. Lies about history and politics, religion, everything. Daily life as presented by the mass media is a profound lie. How do you expect anyone to make significant art out of this? If you look at American art for the last ten years and find that it's a reflection of anything, it's about the fact that dishonesty and paranoia prevail. A lot of recent art reflects the most pitiful and mediocre in our society.

Q: Is recent criticism and reaction to art as mediocre as recent art?

A: The art magazines, or trade journals as I call them, are about as real and significant in terms of America's social and economic structure as the Dallas Social Register or the University of Texas sorority yearbook. And the SoHo art scene is just another little American fad, like Farrah Fawcett. The saddest thing in that phenomenon is that a lot of good people sink with the ship.

I may sound bitter, but I'm not. We all get depressed, but I can actually laugh. At least I'm confident that I know the difference between the truth and a lie. I know a lot about manipulating our social system, but that kind of truth isn't very valuable to me. The truth I can use in my work comes from facing the fears in my own life.

Catalogue of the Exhibition

Paintings

All paintings are oil on canvas.

Dimensions are in inches, height preceding width.

1. *Great American Seal of Approval*, 1979
68 x 68
Lent anonymously
2. *Fire in the Garden*, 1979
90 x 100
3. *My Snakes on Fire*, 1980
90 x 120
4. *Conversations with a Spider*, 1980
90 x 120
5. *Back Door Desires*, 1979
90 x 100
6. *The Harvest*, 1979
90 x 96
7. *Go Jesus Go*, 1979
120 x 90
8. *Fools on Fire*, 1979
90 x 120
9. *When Them Cotton Balls Get Rotten*, 1979
90 x 96
10. *Swimmers from Hell*, 1979
90 x 100

11. *Joe*, 1979

90 x 96

12. *Fighting Back the Tears*, 1980

90 x 100

13. *Monkey Skeletons Picking Flowers with Fish*, 1980

90 x 100

14. *Untitled*, 1980

90 x 120

Drawings

All drawings are pencil, pen and ink on paper from an artist's notebook 11 x 8½ inches executed in 1979/80.

15. *Snakes for You*

16. *For the Madness in All of Us*

17. *Sick American Express*

18. *Good Morning America*

19. *Me*

20. *Go Jesus Go*

21. *Go Get Em*

22. *Snake Eyes*



12. *Fighting Back the Tears*, 1980, oil on canvas, 90 x 100 inches



1. *Great American Seal of Approval*, 1979, oil on canvas, 68 x 68 inches, Private Collection, New York City



10. *Swimmers from Hell*, 1979, oil on canvas, 90 x 100 inches



13. *Monkey Skeletons Picking Flowers with Fish*, 1980, oil on canvas, 90 x 100 inches



Detail of *Monkey Skeletons Picking Flowers with Fish*



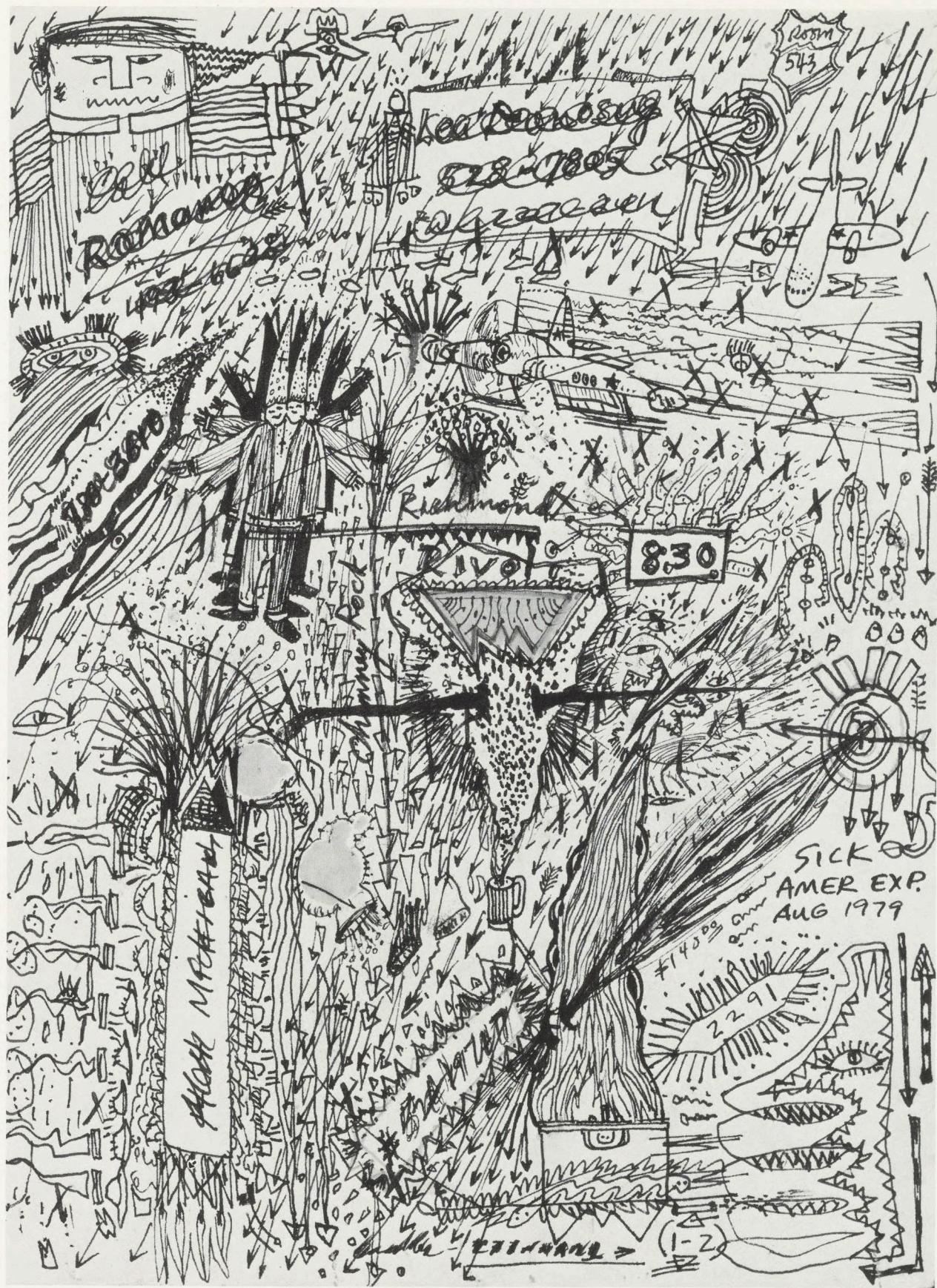
6. *The Harvest*, 1979, oil on canvas, 90 x 96 inches



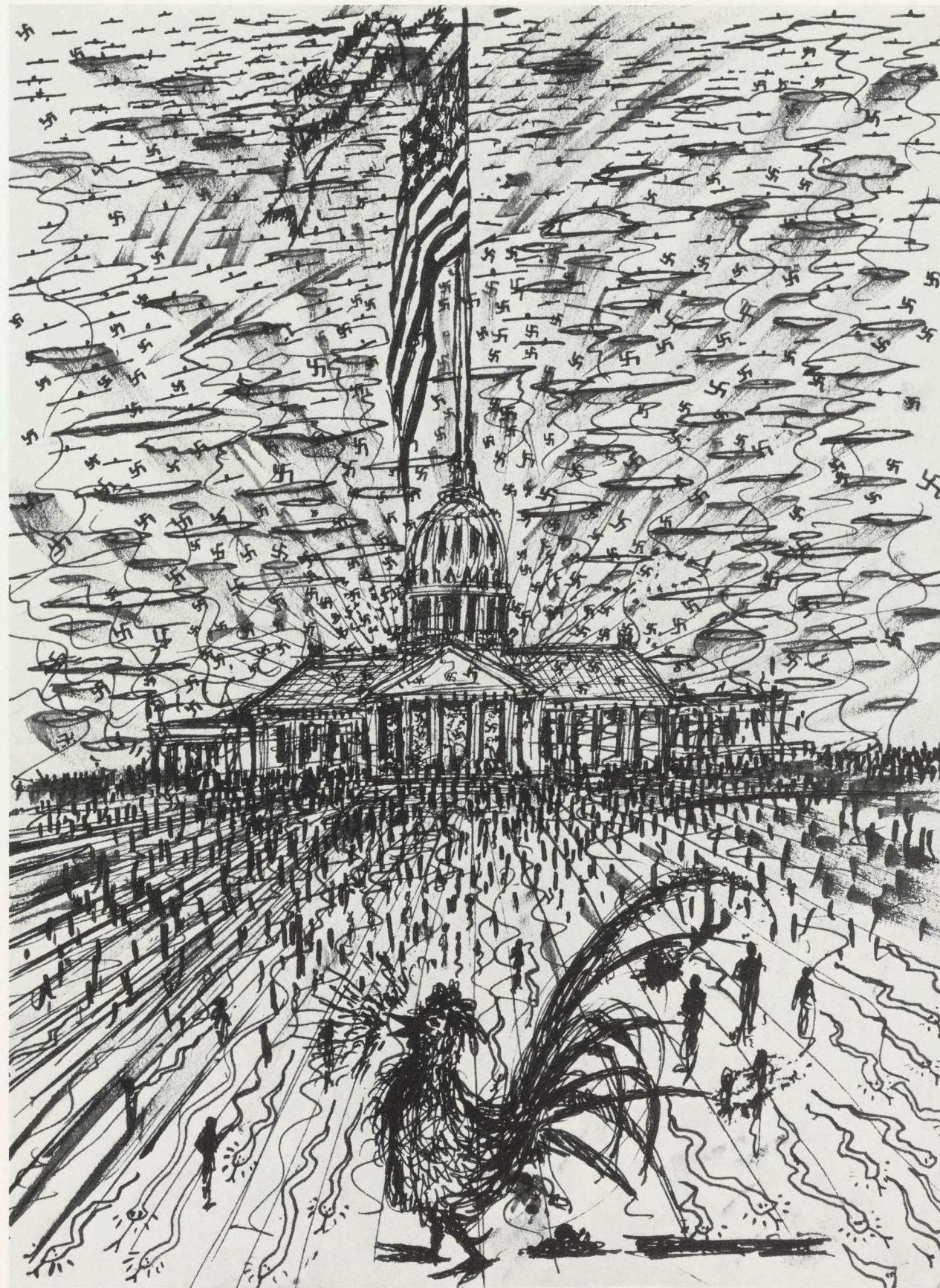
7. *Go Jesus Go*, 1979, oil on canvas, 120 x 90 inches



4. *Conversations with a Spider*, 1980, oil on canvas, 90 x 120 inches



17. *Sick American Express*, 1979, pencil, pen and ink on paper



18. *Good Morning America*, 1979, pencil, pen and ink on paper



19. Me, 1980, pencil, pen and ink on paper



20. *Go Jesus Go*, 1979, pencil, pen and ink on paper



21. *Go Get Em*, 1980, pencil, pen and ink on paper



22. *Snake Eyes*, 1980, pencil, pen and ink on paper

John Alexander

Born Beaumont, Texas, 1945.

Received B.F.A. Degree from Lamar University,
Beaumont, Texas, 1968.

Received M.F.A. Degree from Southern Methodist
University, Dallas, Texas, 1970.

Lives Houston and New York City.

Selected Individual Exhibitions

- 1975 Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, Texas.
Meredith Long Gallery, Houston, Texas.
- 1976 New Mexico State University Museum, Las Cruces.
Meredith Long Gallery, Houston, Texas.
Kornblatt Gallery, Baltimore, Maryland.
- 1977 Delahunty Gallery, Dallas, Texas.
Long Beach Museum of Art, Long Beach, California.
Kornblatt Gallery, Baltimore, Maryland.
- 1978 Max Hutchinson Gallery, New York City.
Max Hutchinson Gallery, Houston, Texas.

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1976 Art Museum of South Texas, Corpus Christi, "Selections for New-old Collections."
The American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York City, Annual Exhibition.
- Institute of Contemporary Art of the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, "Philadelphia Houston Exchange." Catalogue.
- Davidson College, North Carolina, "National Print and Drawing Annual Exhibition." Catalogue. (Curated by Marcia Tucker.)

- 1977 Museum of Art, University of Oklahoma, Norman, "Six Painters Southwest."
Herbert Palmer Gallery, Los Angeles, California, "The Wonderful Whimsical World of Drawings."
Oklahoma Art Center, Oklahoma City, "19th Annual Eighth State Exhibition." Catalogue.
New Orleans Museum of Art, Louisiana, "1977 Artists Biennial." Catalogue. (Juried by Jack Boulton.)
Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., "The 35th Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting." Catalogue.
- 1978 Renaissance Society, University of Chicago, Illinois, "The Art of Texas."
Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indiana, "Painting and Sculpture Today 1978." Catalogue.
University Gallery, Florida State University, Tallahassee, "Four Houston Artists." Catalogue.
John Michael Kohler Art Center, Sheboygan, Wisconsin, "The Art of Texas."
Brainerd Hall Art Gallery, State University, Potsdam, New York, "Landscape Cityscape . . . A Survey of Urban and Rural Landscapes in the 1970's." Catalogue.
- 1979 University Art Museum, University of Texas, Austin, "Made in Texas." Catalogue.
Root Art Center, Hamilton, New York, "On the Right Bank of the Red River." Catalogue.

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